

FWP COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: August 2, 2012

Agenda Item: Proposed Elk Objective Change

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Approval of Proposed Rule

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 10 Minutes

Background

As a guiding document, the Montana Elk Management Plan lists objectives for population size, hunting regulation packages (Standard, Liberal and Restrictive), and monitoring. The intent is to adjust harvest levels with different regulation packages, which are applied as established population “triggers” are reached. “Restrictive” harvest packages are designed to foster population growth, while “Liberal” packages are intended to reduce population size. The elk plan addresses management considerations at the Hunting District level and at the larger Elk Management Unit level, which includes one or more hunting districts with common landscape features (e.g. Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex EMU). The plan describes the process FWP follows when changes are needed. Season structure adjustments are typically addressed within the biennial season setting process and can vary so long as they reflect the appropriate Standard, Liberal or Restrictive intent of the relevant regulation package.

FWP proposes to amend the elk population objectives for Hunting District (HD) 283 in the Garnet Elk Management Unit. HD 283 is currently managed with a district-wide objective of 500 +/- 20% (400 to 600) elk. The district-wide management scale is inappropriate given that elk numbers are increasing beyond desired levels in the North Hills herd-unit, while elk numbers on the Gold Creek herd-unit are below desired levels, and declining. The North Hills herd unit is a source of chronic game damage complaints and hunting access is hampered by land ownership and development. The Gold Creek herd-unit is largely comprised of National Forest System Lands and Plum Creek Timber Company holdings. Objectives at the herd-unit scale are necessary for effective elk population management. In addition, given changes in elk abundance and distribution, along with changing elk population performance, it is also appropriate to change the unit-wide objective. The proposed herd-unit objectives would be:

- North Hills/Evaro herd: 300 elk
- Jumbo herd: 90 elk
- Gold-Belmont-Morrison herd: 300 elk

The overall objective for HD 283 would be adjusted from 500 to 690 elk.

Public Involvement Process & Results

The development of this proposal involved a considerable outreach effort to engage a diversity of landowners and sportspersons. FWP worked closely with the existing North Hills Working Group and formed a second community working group to specifically work on this change. Cognizant of a reference to “Community Working Groups” within the plan, that effort will continue within the public comment period and prior to the development of final proposals. The public comment period on any adopted proposal will run through 5 p.m., Monday, September 17, with final adoption at the October 11 Commission meeting.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

Within the context of the elk plan management application described above, FWP recommends approval of the proposed elk plan objective change. This proposal reflects ongoing discussions with working groups and individuals, including relevant considerations of variable access, game damage, and elk population biology.

Proposed Motion

I move the Commission adopt the proposed 2012 elk objective adjustment as presented by FWP.